

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Sand Lake

## *National Wildlife Refuge*

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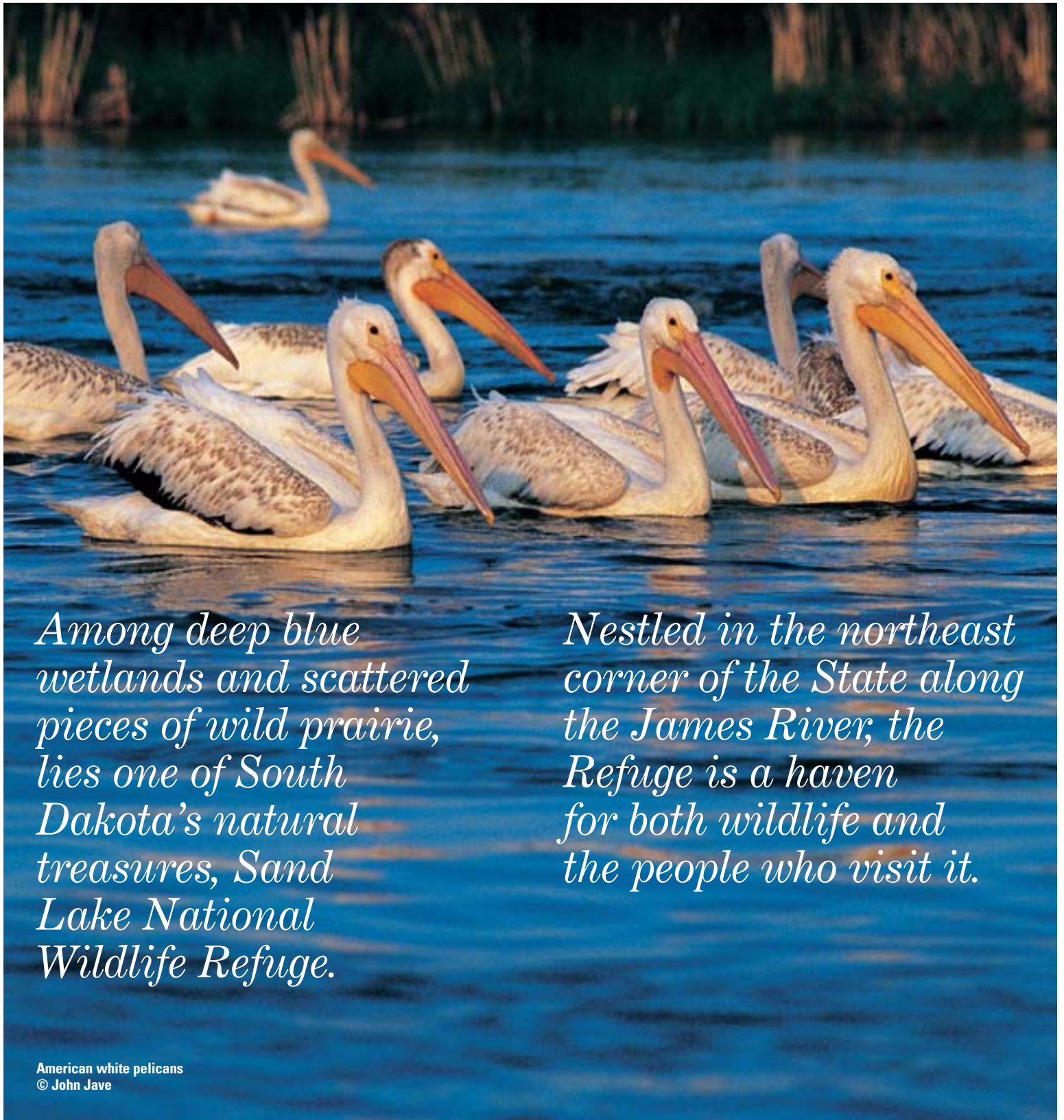
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
<http://www.fws.gov>

For Refuge Information  
1 800 / 344 WILD

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Franklin's gull  
© John Jave



*Among deep blue wetlands and scattered pieces of wild prairie, lies one of South Dakota's natural treasures, Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge.*

*Nestled in the northeast corner of the State along the James River, the Refuge is a haven for both wildlife and the people who visit it.*

American white pelicans  
© John Jave



## Welcome to Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge



*This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol for the National Wildlife Refuge System.*

Famed for its spectacular concentrations of wildlife, Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in 1935 by Congress as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife. The Refuge has 21,498 acres of prime wildlife habitat and is home to over 266 bird species, 40 mammal species, and a variety of fish, reptile, and amphibian species.

Sand Lake NWR is designated as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. It is also a Globally Important Bird Area and has been named one of the top 15 birding sites in North America by *WildBird* magazine. In 1994, the Refuge hosted the largest nesting colony of Franklin's gulls in the world because ideal habitat conditions attracted over 150,000 nesting pairs. The Refuge continues to support large nesting colonies of these and other birds.

Sand Lake NWR is one of over 540 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System – a network of lands set aside specifically for wildlife. Managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Refuge System is a living heritage, preserving wildlife and habitat for people today and for generations to come.

## The James River

The area surrounding Sand Lake NWR was once vast, rolling grassland interrupted only by the slow moving James River. The river's origin is in North Dakota; it travels 750 miles until it empties into the Missouri River near Yankton, South Dakota.

"The Jim," as it is known locally, has the flattest gradient of any river its length in North America. The low gradient, along with two low-lying dams, help to create the marshes seen on Sand Lake NWR. The James River is the lifeblood of the Refuge,

supplying water for the Refuge's wetlands and lakes.

## A Colorful History













In the 1880s, Charles B. Peck and M. R. Baldwin, veterans of the Civil War moved to Columbia, South Dakota, 7 miles south of what is now the Refuge headquarters, and started a steamship company on the James River. The men bought two 65-foot shallow draft paddle-wheelers, named the boats after their wives, and founded the James River Navigation Company. The Fanny Peck and Nettie Baldwin transported freight and passengers between Columbia, South Dakota, and Lamoure, North Dakota. The company only lasted a few years as railroads were coming into the area, and the trains could move freight and people faster and more cheaply than the river boats. Today, it is hard to imagine steamers chugging up and down the river through the area that is now Sand Lake NWR.

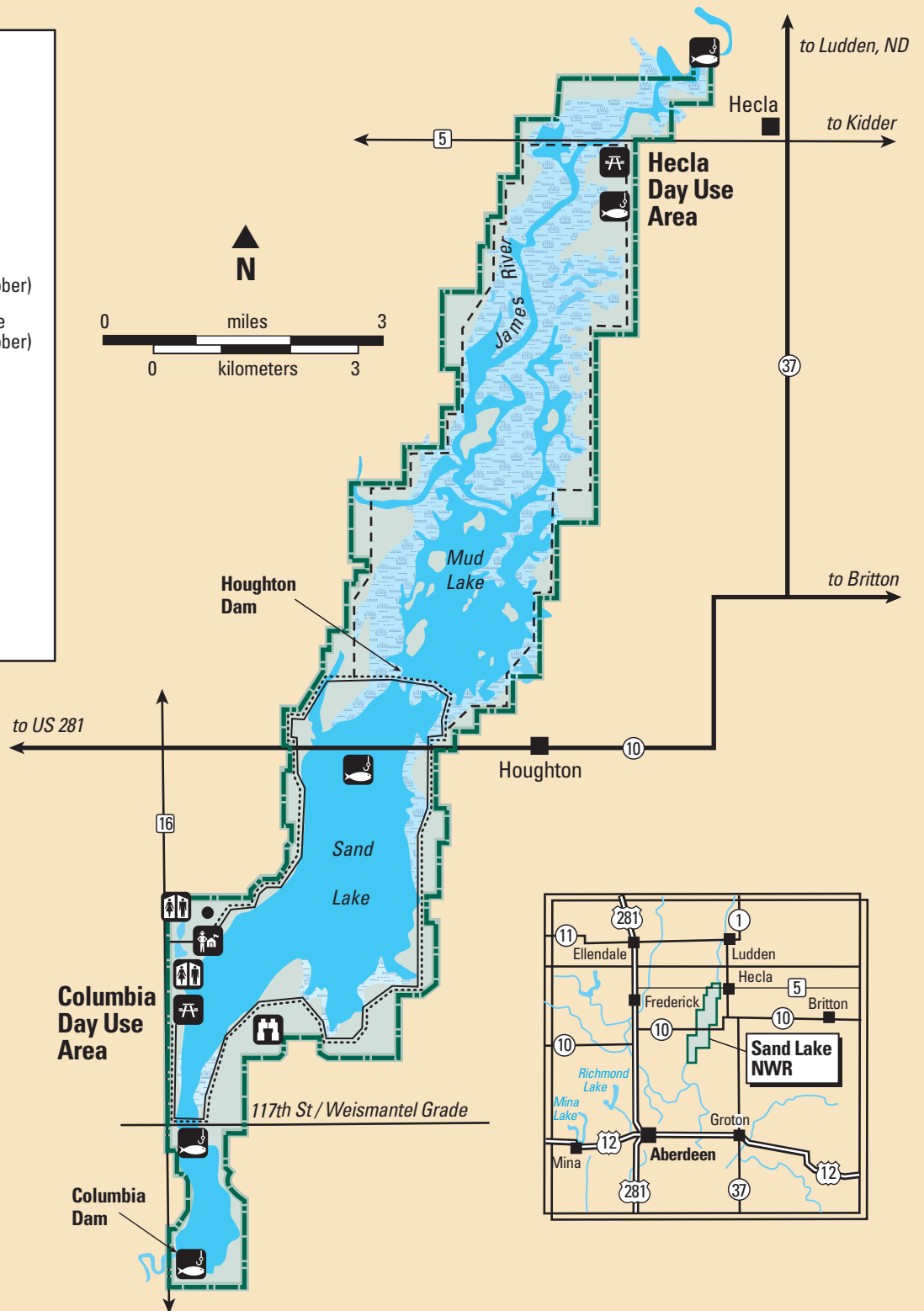
More European American settlers began arriving in the late 1800s, and they brought sweeping changes to the landscape. Early farming and grazing practices depleted essential wildlife habitat as grasslands were converted to crops such as corn and wheat. The habitat deterioration, combined with a major drought, caused migratory bird populations to dwindle to alarmingly low numbers by the 1930s.

In 1935, Sand Lake NWR was established to protect critical wildlife habitat, especially for migratory birds. After establishment, several Civilian Conservation Corps camps provided the initial workforce on the Refuge. Over 200 men built roads, dikes, buildings, and offices; planted trees; and even constructed the observation tower that is still used today.

# Sand Lake

National Wildlife Refuge

-  Refuge Boundary
-  State Highway
-  County Road
-  North Loop Road  
(Open April 1 – mid-October)
-  Wildlife Drive Tour Route  
(Open April 1 – mid-October)
-  Refuge Headquarters
-  Rest Rooms
-  Observation Deck
-  Observation Tower
-  Day Use Area
-  Fishing Area
-  Marsh



## **A Year of Wildlife**

### *Spring*

Spring is a spectacular time at Sand Lake NWR. Millions of migratory birds rest, feed, and refuel on the Refuge during their long journey to their breeding and nesting grounds. Spring is also when the greatest diversity of wildlife can be found on the Refuge. Huge flocks of geese and ducks, as well as wading birds, shorebirds, and songbirds, can readily be seen during spring migrations.

### *Summer*

Over 135 different species of birds raise their young on Sand Lake NWR along with a wide variety of mammals. Young wildlife abounds, and the marshes are full of life. The young birds and animals can be easily seen along the auto tour route and in the marshes and wetlands.

### *Fall*

Although not as intense as the spring migration, the fall migration also offers stunning sights. The sky can be filled with endless flocks of ducks, geese, swans, and other migratory birds. The number of ducks on the Refuge can be in the hundreds of thousands, and wading birds such as herons, egrets, ibis, and pelicans also provide a bounty of color and stature.

### *Winter*

Snow and cold weather drive most migratory birds south before the bitter cold of winter hits. However, the Refuge provides year-round habitat for a variety of resident wildlife, such as deer, pheasants, and grouse.

*Eared grebe  
(right); prairie  
coneflowers  
(above right)*



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## **Managing Habitat for Wildlife**

As at all national wildlife refuges across the country, the needs of wildlife come first at Sand Lake



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NWR. The Refuge is carefully managed to provide wildlife with diverse habitats, including open lakes, marshes, uplands, grasslands, woodlands, and cropland. Water levels are often controlled through dams and structures to create ponds and wetlands. Native grasses are being re-established to provide nesting cover, while cropland provides a vital food source for wintering wildlife.

## **Enjoying the Refuge**

### *A Place for People*

Sand Lake NWR is a great place to learn about and enjoy wildlife. Wildlife viewing, photography, fishing, hunting, interpretation, and education are all popular activities.

### *Hours*

The Refuge is open during daylight hours only. The Refuge lands, including roads, are closed to public access for the winter season, beginning in mid-October. Walk-in access is allowed after February 1, and roads and gates are re-opened April 1. Roads may close periodically after April 1 due to weather conditions. Please call the Refuge staff for road conditions and to confirm the October closing date.

*Visitor Center  
and Headquarters*

The visitor center and headquarters are open year-round Monday through Friday from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, except on Federal holidays. The visitor center has accessible parking and rest rooms, wildlife displays, exhibits, videos, and wildlife identification books. The visitor center is open some weekends during spring migration through the support of volunteers. Please call ahead to confirm weekend hours.

*Wildlife Drive*

A 15-mile auto tour route travels through the heart of the Refuge and offers excellent wildlife and habitat viewing. An auto tour brochure describes the 12 stops along the route. An observation deck overlooking Sand Lake is located near stop number 10. The route is generally open from April 1 to mid-October, but it is occasionally closed due to bad weather.



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*Muskrat*

*Observation  
Tower*

From the top of the tower, you can see a number of wetlands, Sand Lake, and the James River. For those who choose not to climb the tower, interpretive panels at the base of the tower show photos of what can be seen from the top.

*Columbia Day  
Use Area*

Located 1 mile south of the Refuge headquarters, the Columbia Day Use Area offers great birding, an information kiosk, accessible parking, rest rooms, tables, and a sun shelter. The 3/4-mile Prairie Winds Trail loops you through woodlands, open grasslands, and along the shore of Sand Lake, giving you a chance to view a variety of wildlife.

*Hecla Day  
Use Area*

The Hecla Day Use Area, located where the James River enters the Refuge, is a favorite spot among anglers. It also provides good bird watching opportunities.

*Fishing*

Fishing is offered year-round at five designated locations. Pike, walleye, perch, and rough fish are all popular sport species. Please see the Sand Lake NWR fishing brochure for more information.

*Hunting*

Hunting seasons include archery, muzzle-loader, and rifle deer seasons as well as waterfowl and upland game. Specific seasons and regulations are set each fall for hunting. Please see the Sand Lake NWR hunting brochure for more information.

*Special Events*

Special events include the annual Eagle Day Open House the last Sunday in March, International Migratory Bird Day in May, and National Wildlife Refuge Week in October. Contact the Refuge staff for more details regarding special events.

## Wildlife Viewing Tips

The following list contains wildlife viewing tips to make your visit more enjoyable.

- Remember wildlife comes first on the Refuge. Do not approach or harass any wildlife. Watch from a safe distance, and respect their space.
- Use your vehicle as a blind; you are less threatening to wildlife when in your vehicle.
- Mornings and early evenings are the best viewing times because animals are the most active during these times of day.
- Sit, wait, and listen. Wildlife may seem to disappear at your presence, but will usually return shortly if you are quiet and still. Travel roads slowly.
- A pair of binoculars or a spotting scope will help you view wildlife at a distance.
- Familiarize yourself with local wildlife through identification guides and wildlife books.
- Call ahead for wildlife updates and population numbers. Different times of the year offer different species and varied concentrations of wildlife.

*A yellow-headed blackbird perches in the reeds along the marsh.*



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## Refuge Regulations

Know and understand the rules and regulations of the Refuge. Certain areas are closed to all public access for your safety or to protect nesting birds. To minimize disturbance to wildlife and for visitor safety, the following activities are prohibited on the Refuge: camping, swimming, boating, littering, fires, harassing wildlife, and collecting of plants, animals, minerals, antlers, and items of antiquity. In addition, outside of established hunting seasons, weapons in possession must be dismantled or cased.

Please contact the Refuge manager for more information.



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*An American avocet searches for tasty morsels along the shallows of Sand Lake.*



## Sand Lake Wetland Management District

Wetland management districts are little-known, but important components of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Wetland management districts consist of waterfowl production areas, grassland easements, and wetland easements. The Sand Lake Wetland Management District is the largest in the country and consists of eight counties in northeast South Dakota, including Brown, Spink, McPherson, Edmunds, Faulk, Campbell, Walworth, and Potter.

### *Waterfowl Production Areas*

Waterfowl production areas (WPA) are wetlands and uplands purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and managed by wetland management district staff. WPAs provide high quality habitat for waterfowl and many other wildlife species. Sand Lake Wetland Management District staff manage over 45,000 acres of WPAs in the eight South Dakota counties listed above.

### *Exploring the District*

WPAs also benefit people. All WPAs are open to the public for activities such as birdwatching, hiking, photography, and hunting. Foot travel is permitted, but to protect wildlife, camping and the use of any motorized vehicles are prohibited. WPAs are open year-round. Contact Sand Lake WMD staff for more information.

### *Wetland and Grassland Easements*

The Sand Lake WMD staff also work with local landowners to protect and conserve over 550,000 acres of wetlands and grasslands through conservation easements. Landowners retain ownership of their land while the Service purchases the right to protect the wetlands or grasslands.

When a wetland easement is purchased, the wetland is protected against draining, filling, leveling, or burning. The landowner may still hay or farm the wetland basin when conditions allow.

Grassland easements protect important prairie habitats for nesting birds. To ensure protection of nesting birds, young broods, and native grassland species, grassland easements cannot be farmed. Grazing by herbivores is unrestricted, and haying is permitted annually after July 15.

### Accessibility Information

Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs and activities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is available to all individuals regardless of physical or mental ability. Dial 7-1-1 for a free connection to the State transfer relay service for TTY and voice calls to or from the speech or hearing impaired. For more information or to address accessibility needs, please contact the Refuge staff at 605 / 885 6320 or the U.S. Department of the Interior; Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.

*A male northern pintail rests in a waterfowl production area wetland.*



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